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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted of White, Black, and Hispanic parents with children enrolled in south Los Angeles County private Christian schools, in order to determine and compare their expectations of the schools. The increase in Christian school enrollment during the 1970's has been attributed to both white flight from contemporaneous desegregation mandates and dissatisfaction with the secular humanism philosophy of public schools. The increasing minority segment in the 44 evangelical Christian schools in this area has raised the question of whether minority parental expectations are different from white parental expectations. However, the interviews held with a stratified random sample of 147 parents found all three ethnic groups preferred the evangelical Christian school because of its Christ-centered curriculum, with no apparent significant difference in the expectations of the ethnic groups. Strong academics, a disciplined environment, and a caring staff were also important reasons for enrollment. Since religion was a major factor in attracting parents to the private Christian school, the offering of alternative education approaches by the public school system is not likely to bring them back. (DCS)

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PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

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PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

Purpose

The purposes of this study were to determine parental expectations of private Christian schools and ascertain if there were any differences between parental expectations of the three major ethnic groups attending schools in Los Angeles County.

Perspective

The thrust of desegregation in the Los Angeles area during the 1970's and the increase in the number of children entering the private Christian schools suggested to many educators that there was a relationship between the two phenomena. Some have contended that the growth in private Christian schools is primarily due to White flight from desegregation mandates. Those involved in the expansion of the Christian schools contend that parents are unhappy with secular humanism of the public school and are selecting private Christian education for a Christ-centered educational program.

It seems reasonable to assume that, if Christian schools were bastions for White flight, private Christian schools would contain a disproportionate number of Anglo children. However, Christian schools include more than White middle class families. An ever-increasing segment of the Christian school clientele is the minority family.

Evangelical Christian schools in south central Los Angeles county, which is populated by a variety of ethnic families, have 24.5 percent Black students, and 21.0 percent Hispanic students. White students comprise 49.2 percent of the student population in these schools. This change in student population in recent years has caused administrators and teachers to wonder if these Black and Hispanic parents have expectations of the Christian school which are different from White families.

Methodology and Data Collection

A survey was undertaken on the 44 evangelical Christian schools in south Los Angeles county. The researchers selected a stratified random sample of schools from which to survey parents of three major ethnic groups in the area. One school contained a predominantly Black population, another predominantly White. A third school was predominantly Hispanic, and four were multicultural, with a minimum of 15% of the total student population from each of three major ethnic groups. See Table 1.

A structured interview was designed to ascertain parent opinions. Questions were derived primarily from three major research studies: Kamin and Erickson on private schools in British Columbia; Kelman on Jewish schools in Los Angeles; and Edwards, Richardson, Frankel on Montgomery County Schools. A few items which dealt directly with the purpose of this study were added. The interview included items on demographic background, socioeconomic status, parental proclivity toward public and private schools, parents' desire for local control as well as questions relating to parental expectations of evangelical Christian school. The face validity of the questions were ascertained by a panel of experts, who included Drs. Richard Jones, Stuart Kelman, and Kenneth Yglesias. The interview questions were pilot tested using 30 parents from one Evangelical Christian school. Analysis of results using test-retest method idicated a correlation coefficient of .70 or more for each item.

Three interviewers were trained by the researcher to administer the interview schedule. Each of the interviewers was from a different ethnic background. These interviewers queried 147 families. These families were a stratified random sample selected from the total school population. The population was stratified based on the ethnicity of the head of the household. The number of families in each strata group was determined based on the proportion of the population which each ethnic group represented. The interviews lasted about 30 minutes.

TABLE I

DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLE POPULATION BY SCHOOL

AND ETHNICITY OF THE HOUSEHOLD

SCHOOL:	ONE	TWO	THREE	FOUR	FIVE	SIX	SEVEN
Minimum Ethnicity of School	More than 15% Black 15% Hispanic	More than 15% Black 15% White	More than 15% Black 15% White 15% Hispanic	More than 15% White 15% Hispanic	85% Hispanic	85%+ Black	85% White
Households' Ethnicity*							
HISPANIC	11	2	11	4	19	0	1
WHITE	8	9	12	12	0	0	9
BLACK	2	7	24	0	0	14	0
ASIAN	2	0	2	1	0	0	0
OTHER	1	0	0	0	0	0	0

NOTE: Hispanic household defined as husband and wife was Hispanic or a single parent was Hispanic. White household defined as husband and wife were White or the single parent was White. Black household defined as husband and wife were Black or single parent was Black.

Responses from parent interviews were analyzed by ethnic group using Chi-square for categorical data, ANOVA for ratings, and Spearman rank-order for ranked data.

Findings

The findings from this analysis indicate that parents from all three ethnic groups preferred the evangelical Christian school because of its religious focus in the curriculum. There does not appear to be a significant difference in the expectations of the different ethnic groups.

TABLE 2

Parental Expectations for Education in the Christian School by Ethnic Group and Overall

	White	Black	Hispanic	Overall
Christ centered	76%	67%	67%	71%
Academic	17%	18%	11%	16%
Other	7%	15%	22%	13%

The above table shows that 71% of the parents selected Christ-centered academics from seventeen possible reasons as the primary reason they enrolled their children in the evangelical Christian school, and 16% chose strong academics as their first reason for enrolling their children.

When these parents considered the question of continuing enrollment, the predominant reasons were Christ-centered academic, strong academics and a disciplined environment. Under "other" the parents identified a caring staff as a primary reason for re-enrollment of children.

Parents were asked, to rate the school where their children attend on a scale from 1 to 9, with 9 being superior. They gave the Christian school an 8.08 and the local public school a 4.00. Almost all of the parents had attended public school, thus had some direct contact with public schools.

All the parents were considered "thinkers," to use Erickson's term, in that they actively sought information about the school before enrolling their children. Almost two-thirds telephoned other schools and almost 60% visited other schools. The school each parent selected tended to be three miles from home whereas the local public school was half mile from the home.

Analysis of personal family data indicated that these parents had an average educational attainment of two years of college beyond high school and worked at a skilled job. 80% of the families attended church frequently. At least one of the parents considered himself to be an evangelical Christian.

The major difference in responses among the parents surveyed occurred when evangelical households, those in which parent stated that he/she was a born-again Christian, were compared with non-evangelical nouseholds. See Table 3. Evangelical households strongly desired Christ-centered academics whereas non-evangelical households preferred simply a strong academic program, not necessarily a religion-oriented program.

Analysis of the ethnic composition of each of the 44 evangelical Christian schools reflected the ethnic composition of the surrounding community. This finding indicated that enrollment does not appear to be White flight from local public school to neighborhood private school.

Educational Implications

The parents surveyed chose a Christian education for their children based upon their own personal values. Since most preferred a Christian education, the public school could not provide the curriculum in the philosophical frame of reference most of these parents desire. The Christian school parent is unique.

TABLE 3

PERCENT OF EVANGELICAL AND NON-EVANGELICAL PARENT RESPONSES TO PRIMARY REASON TO PRIMARY REASON FOR ENROLLMENT OF CHILDREN IN THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

Category	Evangelical	Non-Evangelical
Christ-centered Academics	78.9	38.2
Academic	9.1	38.9
Disciplined Environment	5.5	5.6
Against Local Public school	2.8	9.1
Social Contacts	0.0	6.3
Responsive to Family Needs	3.7	9.1

NOTE: Totals do not equal 100% because some responses were missing. Mode of each category is underlined.

Nearly six out of ten (57.7%) of the parents from each of the racial and ethnic groups sought out the Christian school for one distinct purpose: to have their children in a Christ-centered academic environment. Since religion was such a major factor in enrollment, the majority of parents would probably not be pulled back into the public school system through the offering of alternative approaches. Although alternatives schools are proposed in various parts of the country, these schools would attract only a small portion of the parents who now enroll their children in the private Christian school. These parents, who in their past attended public schools, now are enrolling their offspring in Christian schools for religious rather than racial reasons.

NOTE: Entire study What Parents Expect of Christian School is available in paperback from JOHO Publications, Bos 4444, Santa Fe Springs, CA 90670.

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